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ABSTRACT

An experiment exploring the use of a single phonological variable in standard French by advanced American speakers of French who teach beginning college-level French classes is reported. Seven graduate instructors' use of the variable was examined in directed interviews with a native speaker and in the reading of sentences containing instances of the variable. In addition, the subjects were asked to identify deviant forms and to evaluate their own pronunciation. The findings show that the teachers used the preferred pronunciation in the more formal sentence recitation but did not identify the deviant phoneme in most cases. Overall, the results suggest that these teachers do not behave like native speakers with respect to phonological variables. The study recommends a method for gradually training American learners to produce mid-vowel contrasts by following these steps: imparting the "Loi de Position" according to which the three mid-vowels are each realized by two variants in complementary distribution; assigning grammatical forms to the mid-vowel occurrences; adding lexical items; and making wider generalizations involving graphic combinations. Appended are diagrams, tables, references, and a pronunciation questionnaire. (MSE)

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On the Acquisition of the Othoepic Norm in French Pronunciation

Paper presented at the Kentucky Foreign Language Conference (Lexington, KY April 24-26,1986).

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1. Introduction

Recent second-language acquisition research has highlighted the ubiquity and centrality of variation in the development of the learner's interlanguage (IL). Traditionally the prescriptive target language (TL) norm, exemplified by educated native speakers, has been accepted as the appropriate objective for classroom foreign language instruction. The position advanced in this paper is that the traditional target is too restrictive and reductionist, since it defines near-native speech in terms of a set of invariant features. In fact native speakers evidence control of a repertoire of linguistic features and communicative strategies which they apply variably depending on the numerous factors that determine the total communicative setting. Near-native skill in the TL requires more than the accurate reproduction of an invariant norm; it entails the ability to perceive and reproduce part of the total repertoire of TL speakers.

2. The Labovian model of IL variability

The most notable attempts to account for IL variability have adopted various aspects of William Labov's sociolinguistic model (1966, 1973). Elaine Tarone (1979, 1983) focuses on the vernacular to standard speech continuum defined by Labov in terms of relative attention paid to speech. She postulates IL as a continuum patterned after that of the target language (TL) in which the most regular and most highly deviant features, produced in unattended speech situations, constitute the vernacular pole. The standard pole comprises attended speech which shows irregularity and closer approximation to the TL, see Figure 1.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

L. Dickerson (1975) and W. Dickerson (1976) have studied the development of phonological IL features over time and in different speech situations. They show that in drawing closer to the TL model learners follow a course analogous to phonological change: they produce a variety of replicas of TL features, each replica predominating in a particular environment. Over time, and differentially across speech styles, replicas closer to the TL feature will spread progressively to new environments just as in a natural language innovative variants of a phonological variable will spread differentially across various environments, word classes, social groups, and geographical areas.

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Both Tarone and the Dickersons limit their concern to invariable target features. The latter chart IL development toward specific English phonemes, the former focuses on the relationship between attention to speech and the nature of IL features. But since the acquisition of near-native ability involves control of a repertoire of variable features, suitable variationist models for IL development must encompass two intersecting continua: the IL continuum and that which characterizes TL language use. In Valdman (1986), I propose such a model (see Figure 2); the IL continuum is viewed as a vector oriented differentially toward overlapping TL systems. In natural second- or foreign-language

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INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

(L2) learning the types of communicative situations encountered by learners will determine in large part the orientation of the IL continuum. In classroom L2 instruction, however, the orientation of the IL continuum can be controlled to a certain degree by the selection of pedagogical norms (Valdman 1972, 1975, 1976, 1983) consonant with learning and teaching objectives.

In this paper, I will describe an experimental study designed to explore the use of a phonological variable, specifically variable "è" in standard French on the part of advanced American learners who also serve as instructors of beginning college French. In the concluding section of the paper, I suggest that the differences between these learners' use of the variable and that of a representative sample of native speakers suggest the adaption of a particular pedagogical norm.

3. The control of the "è" variable by American French instructors

An attempt to study phonological variation among teachers of French was undertaken by Marc Authier (1984). The author was seeking to determine to what extent the conditions of classroom exposure to a particular linguistic variable differed from those that would obtain in a natural communicative context in France. Clearly, the modalities that determine the instructor's use and control of a variable constitute a key variable in a classroom learning environment.

Authier selected the phonological variable of French that has received the greatest attention from variationists and for which there exist several sophisticated sociolinguistically-oriented studies, the "è" variable (Léon 1972; Gueunier et al. 1978; Gueunier et al. 1984). That variable occurs in all morphemes and words realized variably by front unrounded mid vowel values ranging from high-mid (and tense) [é] to low-mid [è]; the orthoepic norm of Standard French (SF) prescribes the categorial use of the latter variant. Gueunier et al. (1978) stands as exemplary in its thorough application of the Labovian model, and it provides a useful frame of reference for the investigation of phonological variation in classroom IL.

The Gueunier study provides information on the use of the "è" variable among a representative group of 75 adult speakers in Tours,

traditionally acclaimed as the region of France where the best French is spoken. The distribution of the two canonical variants of the variable, [é] and [è], was observed in various phonological environments (notably final and medial syllables) and in two polar styles: directed conversation, assumed to yield speech samples approximating the vernacular, opposed to formal situations in the form of the reading of texts, sentences, and individual words. In addition, attempts were made to discover the subjects' subjective norm by elicitating evaluative judgments about paired variants. For example, they were asked to choose which of two renditions of the same utterance represented their habitual pronunciation (autoevaluation), and their attitude toward the orthoepic (prescriptive) norm was measured by asking them to indicate which of two renditions they prefered (normative judgment). The comparison of estimation of habitual pronunciation and preferred pronunciation yielded an index of linguistic insecurity: the more the two types of judgments differed in the direction of the orthoepic variant [è], the greater the linguistic insecurity inferred.

The study demonstrated that in Tours the "è" variable functions as a linguistic marker since the proportion of valorized variants shifts in direct proportion to increased attention to speech: although there were significant differences among the three social strata constituting the population, all speakers showed widely divergent values for the [è] variant in directed conversation and various reading tasks, about 5% and 53%, respectively, for the group as a whole. In addition, the linguistic insecurity index difference between auto-evaluation ("Which form do you habitually use?") and normative judgement ("Which form do you prefer, which is better, is the form X correct or incorrect?"), was 14%. This relatively low figure, as compared to 24% in Limoge (a formerly Occitan-speaking region) and 31% in Saint-Denis de la Réunion (where a local creole is still in general use), reflects low linguistic insecurity.

In a study of the behavior of four graduate instructors at Indiana University, Authier, applying Gueunier's research methodology, obtained markedly different results. In directed conversations his subjects totally rejected the orthoepic norm; except for two isolated instances (the forms mais and j'ai fait), they produced only the [é] variant. However, their behavior in formal style was diametrically opposed: the valorized variant [è] occurred in nearly all cases. In their reactions to auditory stimuli, they showed little difference in auto-evaluation and normative judgement. An attempt to replicate Authier's study with the same type of population failed to obtain the same results, see Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

We increased the number of subjects to seven, and selected from among first-year graduate instructors, most of whom had spent a year in France one or two years before beginning graduate studies. The recordings of directed conversations designed to elicit past tense forms (passé composé and imperfect) and future and conditional forms were transcribed by advanced graduates in French linguistics who had not conducted the

interviews. The interviewing task was assumed by two native speakers. Each transcription was verified by one or two other advanced graduate students. To obtain samples of more attended, formal speech, the subjects were asked to read aloud the following sentences containing eighteen instances of the "è" variable representing the three major morpheme classes (1st person singular future form, singular or 3rd person conditional and imperfect forms) and a representative set of graphic representations; these appear underscored in the sentences. The last sentence serves as a control for the potential hypercorrect pronunciation of pleuré and journée with [è] instead of the invariable "é" which they contain:

1. J'ai porté un bérêt.
2. Il est venu par les marais.
3. Elle se dépêchait pour aller à la banque.
4. Je ferai mes devoirs après lui avoir téléphoné.
5. S'ils le voulaient, tu pourrais partir avec eux.
6. En effet, on voulait fêter son anniversaire.
7. Tu vas balayer toute la maison.
8. Elle aime certains aspects de l'humour français.
9. Vous avez dessin un mouton à la craie.
10. Ferme la porte s'il te plaît.
11. On a fait des progrès en histoire.
12. Cet enfant a pleuré toute la journée.

The subjects' ability to distinguish between the two variants of "è" was assessed by two different discrimination tasks, one involving determining whether paired sentences contrasting by the two variants were the same or different; the other requiring matching an oral stimulus to one of two alternative written representations, see the Appendix. Inferences about the subjects' degree of linguistic insecurity were made by comparing two types of evaluative responses: auto-evaluation and normative judgment.

As a group these French instructors showed some sensitivity to the sociolinguistic value of the "è" variable: the proportion of the valorized [è] variant rose from 37% to 48% with shift to a more formal style. The difference in phonological behavior in the two types of situations proved to be much narrower than in the Tours study. Like Authier's sample our subjects showed no linguistic insecurity, the difference between auto-evaluation and normative judgment was -1% for the group, with a range of +8 to -27. In the section of the normative judgment test that required making prescriptive judgments (correct or incorrect), only one-third of the stimuli forms pronounced with the orthoepically deviant variant [é] were so identified. Judgments on the stimuli forms containing the orthoepic variant [è] were erratic, as were those on the future forms and those containing invariable "é", see Table 2.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Overall, although they show different results, Authier's and our study concord to indicate that French instructors do not behave like native speakers with respect to phonological variables. Authier's subjects showed diametrically opposed values in the distribution of the valorized [è] variant, ours showed very little difference. Both groups showed little if any linguistic insecurity. These differences in phonological behavior stem of course from the fact the French instructors are still foreign learners and that our data are manifestations of an interlinguistic continuum rather than the native speakers' vernacular to standard continuum. That our subjects were not fully competent speakers of French is reflected by their inconsistent discrimination between the two variants, as indicated by the 45% and 49% scores, respectively, in the identification tasks, see Table 1. It also manifested itself by other interlinguistic features, particularly inaccurate--usually glided--renditions of both variants in final stressed syllables; this in fact made reliable transcription difficult, and it may account for the strikingly different results obtained by Authier and us in the production tasks.

That the performance of these French instructors reflects an IL continuum is indicated by wide divergences among individual subjects. Individual differences appear to be a function of differential control of the phonological variants involved and differing awareness of their sociolinguistic value, although it cannot be excluded that they may also reflect exposure to different varieties of French characterized, notably, by differences in the distribution of mid vowels and, as the Gueunier et al. study indicates, by differences in attitudes toward the phonological variables involved. Those subjects who had spent their year abroad in southern France, for example, would have heard few instances of the [è] variant. Typically, in Méridional-accented French, the individual members of mid vowel pairs are in complementary distribution: the high-mid member occurring in free syllables and the low-mid member in checked syllables. Native speakers also show individual variation, but these reflect social factors rather than an ability continuum, see Table 2. Note that in Gueunier's study higher middle class speakers (Class 3) produce a higher proportion of valorized variants in all three types of reading tasks than members of the other two social categories.

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

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4. Pedagogical implications

In my introductory remarks I suggested that a surer road to the attainment of the full range of the native speakers' speech continuum lies in the rejection of the traditional prescriptive norm in favor of more flexible, dynamic pedagogical norms. The results in the pilot experimental studies on the control of the "è" variable on the part of American beginning French instructors lend full support to the notion of pedagogical norm.

Although they evidence frequencies of use of the valorized [è] variant that are superior to those of a representative sample of educated higher middle class northern French speakers (the Class 3 subjects of the

Gueunier et al. study), our subjects still produced a relatively high proportion of variants defined as deviant by the orthoepic norm. Even in formal situations the proportion of [è] variants failed to reach 50% for the group as a whole, see Table 1. More importantly, their discrimination of the two polar variants of the variable tended to be erratic, as was their assignment of morpheme and word classes to either "è" or invariable "é". Table 2 shows that only three of the seven subjects made judgments conforming to the orthoepic norm for the 1st person singular form of the future. Nor were potentially contrasting forms differentiated in the sentence-reading task. In orthoepic French the phonemic distinction /é/ vs. /è/ potentially opposes the 1st person singular of the future to that of the conditional, respectively, and the past participle to the singular and third person plural forms of the imperfect, respectively. These distinctions would not be made consistently by our sample group of subjects. The data in Table 4 indicate the proportion of subjects who produced the forms with the valorized variant:

Conditional:	tu pourrais	5/7	
Future:	je ferai	4/7	
Imperfect:	on voulait	3/7	
	ils voulaient	2/6	(for one subject the form was uninterpretable)
	elle se dépêchait	2/7	

Table 4

Proportion of [è] variants in grammatical morphemes

Whether or not advanced learners of French should abide by the traditional prescriptive norm, and to what degree they should adhere to it, is a decision that individual instructors and/or learners must make for themselves. But the traditional approach which requires learners of French to acquire the distinction between /é/ and /è/ from the very beginning and to distribute the two phonemes appropriately in word and morpheme classes fails to consider the fact that TL features are not acquired linearly in a one-step operation. To the contrary L2 learning proceeds by gradual approximation through the restructuring of input data and the elaboration of autonomous though highly variable interlinguistic systems (Nemser 1971, Selinker 1972, Corder 1977). I have elsewhere (Valdman 1972) outlined a gradual procedure for training American learners to produce mid vowel contrasts, and with various collaborators I have exemplified it in several sets of teaching materials (see, for example, Valdman, Charbonneaux & Salazar 1972; Valdman et al. 1986). Here I review the recommended procedure.

The first step in teaching mid vowel contrasts starts by imparting the so-called Loi de Position, according to which the three mid vowels are realized each by two variants in complementary distribution: high-mid variant in free syllable; low-mid variant in checked syllable. Freed from having to memorize the distribution of the variants in words, learners can focus on the production of a tense and unglided high-vowel variant in final free syllables. For the rounded vowel pairs, the Loi de Position generally holds except for a relatively small set of exceptional items which according to the orthoepic norm, contain the high-mid variant in final checked syllable, e.g.: rose, paume, mauve; heureuse, neutre, feutre. There arise minimal pairs that must be differentiated, e.g.: la pomme vs. la paume, la cote vs. la côte; (il est) jeune vs. il jeûne. For the unrounded pair, "exceptions" occur in final free syllables, and they lead to numerous potential minimal pairs, such as the verb oppositions cited earlier.

For this pair, the second step, the first revision of the pedagogical norm, is to assign the exceptional low-mid vowel to the conditional and imperfect endings, so that learners may produce contrasts such as il a piqué vs. il piquait, j'irai vs. j'irais. Next, individual lexical items would be added to the exceptional list as they were introduced in the teaching materials. Finally, wider generalizations would be made involving graphic combinations -et, -ais, -ai, etc. A useful tool for the establishment of the exceptional lists is Martinet & Walter (1973), a pronunciation dictionary that lists variable pronunciations with reference to a sample set of seventeen typical upper middle class Parisian speakers.

In the proposed procedure the Loi de Position would characterize the vernacular pole in learners' IL; the more complex behavior involving contrasts would represent the IL standard pole. Predictably, learners would revert to the Loi de Position in unattended speech and would show greater conformity to the orthoepic norm in formal situations. But this is precisely what target native speakers do! In this regard, then, the learners would display the full range of the TL repertoire and would evidence a high level of communicative competence.

On the Acquisition of the Orthoepic Norm in French Pronunciation

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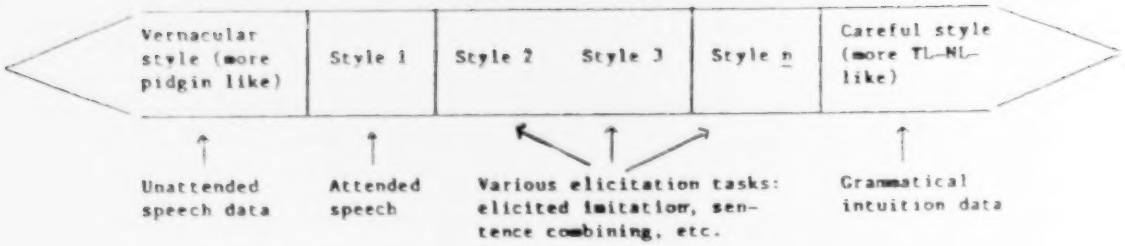

Figure 1. The Interlanguage (IL) Continuum
(from Tarone, E. 1983, p. 152)

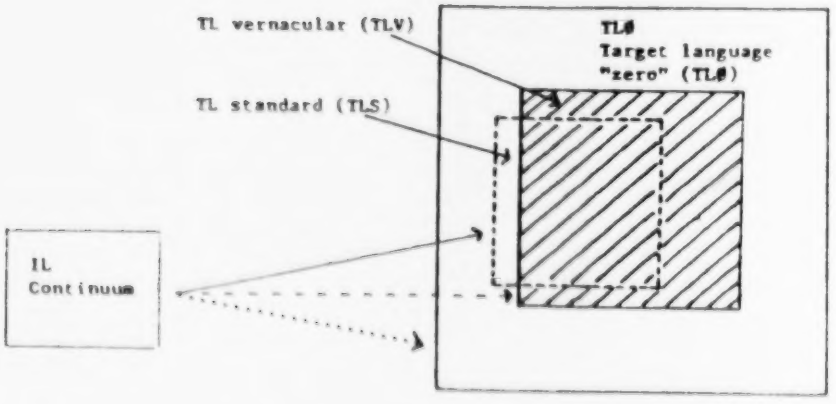

Figure 2. Possible orientations of IL continuum toward various TL norms.

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SUBJECT	DIRECTED CONVERSATION	SENTENCE READING	IDENTIFICATION	ESTIMATED USE	PREFERENCE
2-6	39%	72%(+33)	2/6 2/5	44%	40% (-4)
2-9	44%	71% (+27)	2/6 3/5	67%	40% (-27)
2-8	46%	56% (+10)	2/6 3/5	75%	83% (+8)
2-10	44%	47% (+3)	3/6 3/5	63%	71% (+8)
1-1	23%	44% (+19)	4/6 2/5	89%	86% (-3)
1-3	12%	24% (+12)	3/6 2/5	56%	33% (-23)
2-7	54%	24% (-30)	3/6 2/5	63%	71% (+8)
Group Averages	37%	48%	19/42 = 45% 17/35 = 49%	65%	64%

Table 1
Production and evaluation of "è" variable
by American graduate French instructors

Number of correct prescriptive judgments on use of deviant [é] in: il dirait, elle dansait, je sortais; projet, suspect, laid, je vais.	SUBJECTS 1-1	1-3	2-6	2-7	2-8	2-9	2-10
	0	2	1	1	5	4	3
Wrong prescriptive judgments on variable "è" in:							
je serai [è](norm:[é])		x		x			x
je prendrai [é](norm:[é])			x		x		
saison [é]				x	x		
tu dirais [é]			x	x			
Wrong prescriptive judgments on invariable [é] in:							
ouvrez [é]	x		x			x	
poignée [é]			x				
boucher [è]		x		x	x	x	

Table 2
Performance on prescriptive judgment task
by American graduate French instructors

TYPE OF READING TASK	SOCIAL CLASS 1	2	3
Reading of self-contained text	17%	17.5%	28%
Reading of sentences	0%	4.5%	11%
Reading of isolated words	16%	28%	47%

Table 3

Sentence-reading:

1. J'ai porté un bérêt.
2. Il est venu par les marais.
3. Elle se dépêchait pour aller à la banque.
4. Je ferai mes devoirs après lui avoir téléphoné.
5. S'ils le voulaient, tu pourrais partir avec eux.
6. En effet, on voulait fêter son anniversaire.
7. Tu vas balayer toute la maison.
8. Elle aime certains aspects de l'humour français.
9. Vous avez dessiné un mouton à la craie.
10. Ferme la porte s'il te plaît.
11. On a fait des progrès en histoire.
12. Cet enfant a pleuré toute la journée.

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APPENDIX

QUESTIONNAIRE ORAL SCRIPT & NORMATIVE ANSWER SHEET

PARTIE A

Vous allez entendre des phrases groupées deux par deux. Indiquez chaque fois si les deux phrases sont pareilles ou différentes.

1. Je partirai certainement./ Je partirais certainement. D
2. Il résonne beaucoup./ Il raisonne beaucoup. D
3. Je chantais bien./ Je chantais bien. P
4. Elle voit des claies./ Elle voit des clés. D
5. Je lui donnai mon livre./ Je lui donnai mon livre. P
6. On l'a mangé./ On la mangeait. D

PARTIE B

Vous allez entrendre une suite de phrases. Choisissez et soulignez chaque fois la phrase que vous pensez avoir entendue.

1. Je marcherais volontiers dans la forêt. (Je marcherai...)
2. On la piquait. (On l'a piqué.)
3. Il voulait parler du prêt. (...du pré.)
4. Je laissai mes clés à la maison. (Je laissais...)
5. On a essayé de contrôler les marées. (...les marais.)

PARTIE C

Les phrases suivantes contiennent chacune un mot souligné. Les phrases seront prononcées deux fois. La différence de prononciation portera sur le mot souligné. Habituellement, prononcez-vous le mot souligné de la première ou de la deuxième manière, ou est-ce que vous le prononcez d'une autre manière encore?

1. Tu prenais un bain. ɛ e
2. Va au piquet. ɛ e
3. Il l'a fait exprès. ɛ e
4. La campagne est paisible. ɛ e
5. Bois ton lait. ɛ e
6. Nous avons une femme de ménage. e ɛ
7. Ils t'accompagneraient au cinéma. ɛ e
8. Je travaillai dur. e ɛ
9. Elle a reçu un bouquet de fleurs. e ɛ
10. S'il vous plait, quelle heure est-il? ɛ e

PARTIE D

Les phrases sur votre feuille de réponses seront prononcées deux fois. Indiquez si vous préférez la première ou la deuxième prononciation du mot souligné ou si vous pensez que l'une vaut l'autre. Attention, votre jugement ne doit porter que sur le mot souligné.

1. Nous sommes le premier octobre. e ɛ
2. On l'appelle au guichet numéro quatre. e ɛ
3. Vous apporterez du vin. e e
4. Elle connait ce monsieur. ɛ e
5. Les oeufs sont frais. ɛ e
6. Il met son chapeau. ɛ e
7. Ils regardaient le paysage. ɛ e
8. Le président habite à la Maison Blanche. e ɛ
9. Je viendrais au cours. ɛ e

PARTIE E

Dans chacune des phrases suivantes, indiquez si le mot donné est bien ou mal prononcé. Votre jugement portera uniquement sur le mot écrit sur votre feuille.

1. Qu'est-ce qu'il en dirait? e
2. Je vais lui téléphoner. e
3. Je serai toujours là. (ɛ)
4. En quelle saison pars-tu en vacances? ɛ
5. Il a beaucoup de projets. e
6. Tu dirais la vérité? ɛ
7. Cet homme est laid. e
8. Je sortais de chez moi tous les soirs. e
9. Le suspect s'enfuit. e
10. Ouvrez la fenêtre. e
11. Il me donne une poignée de bonbons. e
12. Elle dansait toujours à l'opéra. e
13. Le boucher coupe la viande. (e)
14. Je prendrai le train. e

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